

CLAIMS

1. Apparatus for supporting negotiations comprising a group of agent means, wherein at least one of the agent means comprises means for initiating interactions between the agent means, and means for defining the negotiation in terms of a plurality of phases during which particular parts of the negotiation are completed, such that the responses to requests in an earlier phase in the process constrain the responses generated in subsequent phases, and wherein each agent means has means for dynamically negotiating an agreement in accordance with the said definition.

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2. Apparatus according to claim 1 such that the space of options for decisions during each phase of the negotiation that each agent has to make is constrained relative to the possible states of the overall negotiation

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3. Apparatus according to claim 1, comprising means for the generation of a description of the interactions required in a negotiation, and the purpose of each interaction, and means for the retrieval from a store of a process that can act on these descriptions

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4. A method for performing negotiations using a plurality of computer-based agent means, wherein one of the agent means initiates interactions between the agent means, the agent means dynamically negotiate an agreement, and the negotiation process is defined in terms of a plurality of phases during which particular parts of the negotiation are completed, such that the responses to requests in an earlier phase in the process constrain the responses generated in subsequent phases.

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5. A method according to claim 4 in which the availability of options for decisions during each phase of the negotiation is constrained relative to the possible states of the overall negotiation

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6. A method according to claim 4 or 5, comprising the phases of generation of a description of the interactions required in a negotiation, and the purpose of each interaction, and retrieval from a store of a process that can act on these descriptions

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7. A computer program or suite of computer programs for use with one or more computers comprising a set of instructions to carry out the method as set out in any one of claims 4, 5 or 6 or to provide any of the apparatus as set out in any one of claims 1, 2 or 3.